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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact of various aspects of work, especially unemployment, on the amount and quality of paternal involvement with preschool or kindergarten children and examines how attributions about the cause of unemployment might influence father-child interaction. Findings indicate that children of employed families obtain significantly higher Peabody Picture Vocabulary percentile scores than children of unemployed fathers. Of 20 children retained in kindergarten, 25 percent were from homes with jobless fathers. Indications were found that blue-collar men who have been unemployed for some time play a larger role in childrearing than employed men in the same social class. Further, the fathers appeared to like the experience, even those experiencing conflicts with the youngsters. All the mothers and all the fathers attributed their family's difficulty to external conditions, not to the men's poor attitudes, lack of effort in finding a job, or poor job performance. In contrast, data from the Great Depression suggest that difficulties in family relations often ensued from the wife's belief that it was her husband's fault that he was unemployed. There was no such indication of blame in this sample. Tentative suggestions for mental health interventions are discussed. (RH)

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Effects of Unemployment on Fathering

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Abstract

This paper presents an initial report on a study of intact, working-class families with a preschool or kindergarten-aged child. The study focuses on the impact of various aspects of work, especially unemployment, on the amount and quality of paternal involvement with the child, and examines mediating variables that might influence the father-child interaction.

Unemployment is a painful condition. It not only assaults the victims directly involved, but the victims' families as well (Buss & Redburn, 1983; Elder, 1979; Margolis, 1982; Moen, 1979, 1983). Those facts were documented over 40 years ago during the Great Depression of the 1930's (Cavan & Ranck, 1938; Komarovsky, 1940). In spite of this apparent wealth of knowledge, the truth is that researchers understand very little about what occurs to young children in the 1980's when fathers lose their jobs. As authorities on unemployment have pointed out, there are many gaps in the literature regarding the effects of joblessness, including the effects on children's education and later careers (Buss & Redburn, 1983). Without a solid foundation of such knowledge, efforts by mental health professionals to prevent dysfunctional behavior in the children of unemployed men are likely to be ineffective, and perhaps even inappropriate.

The issue is critical for it has been estimated that in 1979 when the national unemployment rate was over 7%, more than 10 million children under 18 experienced unemployment of a parent, or 15% of the children in that age bracket (Margolis, 1982). And the percentage of children 3 to 6 years of age in that unfortunate group is undoubtedly larger than its proportionate share because young families with preschool children are the most likely to have an unemployed breadwinner (Moen, Kain, & Elder, 1983). This is particularly true in blue-collar families for semi-skilled and unskilled workers with low seniority are the most vulnerable to job loss (Moen et al., 1983).

Numerous theories have been put forth hypothesizing linkages between the work role, the parent role, and the child's development. For example, stress theory has been used to spell out the conditions under which unemployment, a stressor, is associated with disrupted family functioning (Voyandoff, 1983).

Factors mediating that association were cited as including the family's resources, the family's definition of the event, and the structures and values in the family. A more comprehensive theory (House, 1981; Price, 1982) posited that objective social conditions (such as unemployment) and mental health outcomes for family members are linked but 4 global factors mediate that association: social variables, such as social supports; psychological variables, such as coping styles; physical-chemical-biological factors, such as the use of drugs; and genetic factors, such as the family history of illness. Clearly the issue is complex, and certainly many factors influence the outcomes for young children when their fathers are out of work. In the investigation to be described, a few potential mediators were explored with the full awareness that many others might have been considered.

As to the research literature concerning unemployment effects on young children's cognitive and social functioning, only two outcomes have been well established. The consequence with the most solid support is that the likelihood of child abuse is increased. According to one careful analysis (Margolis, 1982), the incidence of child abuse would be about 8% lower if the father had not been jobless in the 1970's when the unemployment rate was approximately 8%. In general, it was found that the risk increases at about the same amount as the level of unemployment. But young children are particularly at risk for it has been found that abusing families are more likely to direct the abuse at a very young child if the father is unemployed (Light, 1973). One explanation offered for the association between paternal unemployment and an increase in child abuse is that women may increasingly leave childcare to enter the job market to offset the loss of their husband's

income (Steinberg, Catalano, & Dooley, 1981). The net effect could be to increase the proportion of childcare by those, such as fathers, with less skill and less patience in caring for the child, thus normal child management problems may provoke more abuse from such replacement caregivers.

The second established outcome of paternal unemployment for young children's functioning is well documented, but those documents are 40 to 50 years old. A classic longitudinal study was conducted by Glen Elder (1974, 1979; Elder & Rockwell, 1979) about the effects of the Great Depression on children and a portion of that research focused on children who were three to five years old during the early phase of the Depression. Elder found the deprived boys in this age group were negatively affected, but not the deprived girls. However, the negative impact on sons was not demonstrated until they entered secondary school when they exhibited poorer school performance as well as a tendency to withdraw from adversity and employ self-defeating tactics (Elder, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The deprived boys' greater impairment appeared to stem from the greater conflict between father and sons in these families, and more erratic and punitive discipline from their fathers (Elder, 1979). One of the most important mediators of this paternal behavior appeared to be the personality characteristics of fathers and children; the presence of an irritable father or irritable child significantly increased the likelihood that unemployment would have long-range negative consequences for the boy's life course development (Bronfenbrenner, 1983).

In sum, little is known about what is going on today between unemployed men and their young sons and daughters. The goal of the study to be discussed is to determine the effect of unemployment on father relations with young

children in two-parent, primarily blue collar families, and to learn some of the consequences for the children's social and cognitive competence. We also wish to explore some possible mediators of those relationships. In this paper, the discussion will be confined to only one of the potential mediators investigated, the family's definition of the situation, that is, their attributions about the cause of the problem.

This paper is an initial report of our findings. The study is still underway and we are now completing our data collection on a second cohort of students, that is, those in preschool or kindergarten during the 1984-1985 school year. The findings to be discussed focus on the first cohort, those attending school in the 1983-1984 academic year.

PROCEDURE

To obtain the sample, we turned to a small school system, Willow Run, and to two Wayne County Head Start Centers, all three in working class communities near Detroit. In the School District the kindergarten teachers were asked to distribute a flyer to all intact families of children in their classes requesting parent participation in a study on the effects of their work status on young children so that the school could serve their students more effectively. The handout requested that parents reply to a few questions about the employment status of each parent if they wished to take part in the study. So few flyers were returned that we realized an entirely different strategy would be necessary.

The new approach was to obtain a list of the kindergarten children with two parents and an unemployed father from school records. A letter was then mailed to each of these families, signed by the building principal, describing

the study and requesting their participation which involved, primarily, an interview with each parent. If the parents agreed to participate, they were told that their child would be administered some tasks in school or at home on a different occasion, and interviews were conducted separately and privately with each parent.

In the Head Start Program in the Willow Run School District and in the Wayne County Programs only the second procedure was followed. For these families, however, letters were mailed to all two-parent families, signed by the head of each Program, and no tests were administered to the preschoolers. A preschool program with a very low tuition fee in the Willow Run District was also included in the study.

RESULTS

The results will be described in a global fashion since the data collection is not complete and the N's are low. However, certain findings have emerged even at this early point which warrant reporting and discussing in terms of implications for mental health workers. One major limitation of the study must be emphasized. The response rate was exceedingly low; overall, in only 22% of the eligible families were both parents interviewed. In some cases, one parent agreed to participate but not the other. In other cases, the family moved before we could interview both parents, or the couple separated.

Some indication that it was not our approach that created the problem came from a recent dissertation on unemployment effects conducted in schools near Detroit (Friedmann, 1984). The response rate in that investigation was 9%. Another recent study in a similar geographic area which attempted to

determine the effects of divorce on adolescent girls in junior high school concluded with an overall response rate of 24% (Perl, 1985). It appears that nonclinic families who have experienced recent misfortunes, or fear they may, are not particularly interested in participating in research investigations on the issue. As one of the students on the project observed, it is like trying to interview men about impotence.

The first set of findings to be discussed is based on the interviews conducted with mothers and fathers in 22 families. Five families had a father currently unemployed and 17 had families with a working father. Some of the employed families had volunteered when the flyer was distributed to parents of kindergarten children, some were families with children in the tuition preschool, and some were families that contained an unemployed father when the child was initially enrolled in kindergarten or Head Start but he had since found a job. Of the employed families (this term will be used for families with an employed father), six were in the middle class, six were in the lower middle-class, and five were in the working class. All but two families were white. If social class had been determined of the five unemployed men using the last job the father had to obtain a score, most of the men (all of whom were white) would be in the working class. To make more meaningful comparisons between employed and unemployed families, for some variables the unemployed families were compared only to working-class families.

The data to be reported pertain to parents' views on how involved the father is in childrearing, their childrearing values, their confidence that their child will get a good job and a good education, their perception of the child's ability to get along with peers, and their estimates of their child's absences from school in the past year.

The most important finding was that unemployed fathers were significantly more involved in childrearing than the employed group of families in the working class. The instrument used to assess the amount of father involvement has been used in several studies and found to have validity and reliability (Bagi, 1982; Barahal-Taylor, 1984; Nietfeldt, 1984; Radin, 1982; Radin & Goldsmith, 1983; Radin & Goldsmith, in press). The scale is composed of five components including one on the amount of father involvement in physical care of the child and another on the availability of the father to the child. For each parent, a score is obtained for each component, and for the sum of the five components. There was a significant difference between unemployed families and working-class families when either mothers' or fathers' total scores were considered, when mothers or fathers' scores for the component availability were considered, and when fathers' scores of physical care of the child were examined. In all cases, the score for the unemployed fathers was higher. For example, on the average, wives in the employed group estimated that their husbands were primary caregivers for nine hours per week. For wives in the unemployed group the figure was 31 hours.

For none of the other variables were there significant differences between unemployed families and employed familes in any class when either maternal or paternal responses were considered. For example, the unemployed parents were as confident that their children would get good jobs and a good education as all other parents, and expressed no more approval for an authoritarian approach to childrearing than the other parents. Both mothers and fathers in the unemployed group saw their children's ability to get along with peers as the same as other children's or better, and felt their children were rarely absent from school.

The next set of data to be discussed concerns the scores obtained by 17 kindergarten children who were administered a battery of tests. Nine of the children had unemployed fathers and eight had employed fathers. It should be noted that only eight children were youngsters of the 22 families discussed above. There were two reasons for this. One was that some of the 22 parents had preschoolers who were not tested. The second reason was that many children were administered tests in school as soon as the parents agreed to participate but before both parents could be interviewed, they had moved, separated, or changed their minds about the interview.

The four instruments administered to the child were: 1) a verbal intelligence test - the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn, 1965); 2) a test assessing young children's perception of the parental traits, specifically, punitiveness and nurturance (Kagan & Lemkin, 1960); 3) a scale assessing young children's perception of their own competence and acceptance by others (Harter & Pike, 1984); and 4) a test assessing children's perceptions of the sex-role stereotyped tasks performed by mothers and fathers at home (Radin, 1982). In addition, a short questionnaire developed on this project was administered to determine the kindergarteners' understanding of unemployment. School records also provided data for most of the children remaining in the District on the California Achievement Test administered at the end of kindergarten.

Most outstanding about the scores was their similarity across the two groups of children except in two areas: intellectual performance and perceptions of unemployment. The children of employed families obtained significantly higher Peabody Picture Vocabulary percentile scores than

children of unemployed fathers. The mean percentile for the former group was 81; for the latter group it was 51. California Achievement Test scores, while available for only three children in each group were congruent with PPVT scores. For example, the mean percentile for prereading on the CAT was 89 for the children of employed men and 49 for children of jobless men. The same trend was evident when only white children of both groups were considered (seven in the employed group and six in the unemployed). Support for hypothesis that children of out-of-work men are at greater academic risk than their peers with working fathers also emerged when the list was examined of the children retained in kindergarten by the school in May 1984. Of the 20 children retained, 25% were from homes with jobless fathers. The unemployment rate was about 11.5% in the area at the time.

As to the children's understanding of unemployment, it was quite evident that youngster's whose own family was experiencing the unfortunate condition had a more realistic view of what that abstract concept meant then children with working fathers. To cite one example of the greater precocity of the unemployed group, 56% of the children in the unemployed group referred to lack of money or toys or food in describing what unemployment meant, or why it might elicit negative feelings, but only 12% of the children of employed fathers provided such answers.

There was similarity in children's perceptions of fathers' punitiveness across employment groups suggesting that the jobless men were not harsher with their children than their peers with jobs. As to the children's stereotyping of maternal and paternal activities at home, there was little difference in scores across groups. The data on the competence scale revealed that the

means for the two groups of children were very close in all areas and resembled the norms provided by the developers of the instrument (Harter & Pike, 1984). (The instrument provided information about children's self perceptions in the areas of cognitive competence, physical competence, acceptance by peers, acceptance by mothers, and acceptance by fathers).

Perhaps the most valuable data collected in this study to date were the responses of parents to open-ended questions. Especially revealing were answers to questions concerning how father's behavior with the child had changed as a result of unemployment and how this change affected the child, how the father's view of the paternal role had changed since unemployment, and the advantages and disadvantages of the current childcare arrangement. Some of these responses will be summarized and information provided about the families' source of income and duration of unemployment.

It should be said at the outset, that all of these parents attributed the blame for the father's unemployment to external factors, primarily the economy, but also to his low seniority, or to bad luck in the case of a man who was injured on the job. None of the individuals attributed any blame to the man's behavior or attitudes.

In family W, where the family received AFDC, Mrs. W said her husband's behavior had changed because he was now more grouchy with the child, a lot less patient. She said this paternal behavior affected the child in a negative way. The youngster was more fussy, cried a lot, and was real moody. As to her husband's view of the paternal role now that he is unemployed, Mrs. W stated that he finds it difficult not to be working and to receive welfare money. Mr. W also believed his behavior with his child had changed since his

unemployment four months ago because he was more irritable and disciplines the children more often than he should. He felt this had an effect on his child who tends to go to his mother more than he used to and avoids his father somewhat. As to his view of the father role, he feels father should bring home the bacon and he can't do that now. He did see advantages in the current childcare arrangement, however. He gets to be with his children more and is learning more about them. The disadvantage is that the children sometimes get on his nerves.

In the A family, the father had been unemployed for almost two years. The family gets General Assistance and aid from relatives. Mr. A felt his behavior changed since unemployment because he spends more time with the child, and as a result, the child is more demanding of time with his father. Mr. A believed his view of the father's role changed since unemployment because he is now closer to the kids and is more involved in watching kids grow. Mrs. A's view of her husband's changes are in general agreement with Mr. A's. As a result, she feels the child is now closer to his father and the father is more a part of the family. Mrs. A believes her husband's view of the father's role changed in that he learned how to discipline and care for the children more. The main advantage of the current arrangement is that it is easier to have dad watch them and she knows the children will be disciplined.

The L family receives AFDC. Mrs. L has seen no change in his behavior with the children or in his view of the father role since his unemployment two years ago. Mr. L, however, felt his behavior did change. He gets mad at the child a lot and finds it hard to relate to him. The result is that he

believes the child is now scared of his dad. He does see an advantage to the current arrangement, however. He is close to the family and feels it is important for mom and dad to be with their kids.

In the E family, the father has been unemployed for three years and his wife works. Mr. E feels the pressure of seeking a job increased the tension in the home but otherwise he has a close, stable relationship with his child. He feels his child reacts to his father's tensions by rebelling. He also feels he is lucky to have a chance to be with his daughter; he missed the chance with his first child. He enjoys being able to be with her every day and feels he has more control over what she does that way. On the other hand, Mrs. E believes unemployment changed her husband's behavior with their child in that he was more patient before he was home all the time. He and the child fight a lot and the relationship is deteriorating as time goes by. As to the child's reactions, she sometimes does things to make him mad and plays parents against each other.

The last three families are in cohort II and were just interviewed in the past few months.

In the C family, the mother is working and the father gets a disability pension. According to the father, who has been unemployed for 3 1/2 years, he is more involved with his daughter since becoming jobless and feels this has had an effect on the child. There is now greater learning by the child. As to his view of the father's role, he now sees more sharing of childcare between mother and father. Mrs. C felt that he now knows more about caring for children. She saw the advantage of the current arrangement as not having to pay a babysitter and giving the father more time to learn about children.

The major disadvantage is that she misses being with the youngster. The interviewer's comments were particularly revealing with this family. As part of the study, the father was told that we wanted to see how he and his child play together. He was given a puzzle and told, "I would like you to do this puzzle with your child." The interviewer noted "Father obviously not used to playing with daughter. He did the whole puzzle by himself as his daughter watched."

In the H family, Mr. H has been unemployed for 3 1/2 years and the family is supported by AFDC. Mr. H sees a change in his behavior in that he is with the child more. The effect on the child is that he wants to be with his father. Mrs. H supported her husband's views and said the child likes to be with his dad all the time now. An interesting comment was made by the interviewer about the father's behavior with the child during the interview. She said that hostile shouts at the children alternated with unusually permissive behavior, e.g., allowing the children to climb on the kitchen table and pound each other on the head.

Finally, there is the M family. Mr. M has been unemployed for three years and the family's source of support is AFDC. Mr. M felt the major advantage of the current arrangement is that he gets to be with his children more although he feels guilty about not being able to buy toys for the kids. His wife generally concurred with this statement adding that he likes being with the family more.

All seven men said they liked, or liked very much, the amount of their involvement with their child. All of the mothers expressed similar positive views about the amount of their husband's involvement in child care.

A general conclusion that can be drawn from the open-ended questions is that there are tensions between fathers and their young children and child management problems, yet all of the men saw some positive aspects of their involvement with their youngsters, and all expressed a positive view of the amount of that involvement. All of the mothers also enjoyed his role in childrearing. In addition, there clearly are discrepancies in the perceptions of many mothers and fathers about the men's behavior with the young children and about the children's behavior with the men.

DISCUSSION

As to the overall picture, it appears from the families and children we studied that the children of unemployed fathers are no different in the socio-emotional domain from their peers whose fathers are working. This finding is in keeping with the initial Elder (1979) results. The kindergartners with jobless fathers did not perceive themselves as less competent than their peers, nor did they have any more doubts about their parents' and peers' acceptance of them than did classmates with a working father. And their parents tended to agree with this perception for unemployed men and their wives did not believe their children were having any more difficulty getting along with other children than did working fathers and their wives. Further, the children of jobless men did not perceive fathers to be any more punitive than classmates with working fathers. The men's similar views of authoritarian childrearing values tended to support the children's perceptions.

The one domain in which the children of jobless fathers appeared to be disadvantaged is that of cognitive functioning. It is difficult to determine

whether this deficit developed subsequent to paternal unemployment because most of the men in the study had been unemployed for over two years, many over three years, and the children were only four to six years of age. Significantly, the children of jobless men, while appearing to be less intellectually capable than peers of working fathers still had a more realistic view of unemployment suggesting that the home environment did stimulate cogitive development in at least one area.

There are clear indications that blue-collar men who have been unemployed for some time play a larger role in childrearing than employed men in the same social class. Further, the fathers appeared to like the experience, even those experiencing conflicts with the youngsters. Perhaps one explanation for the apparent absence of genuine hostility in the men about their current role in childcare is the family's definition of the situation. All the mothers and all the fathers attributed the difficulty to external conditions, not to the men's poor attitudes, lack of effort to find a job, or poor job performance. Data from the Great Depression suggested that difficulties in family relations often ensued from the wife's belief that it was her husband's fault he was unemployed (Cavan & Ranck, 1938). There was no such indication of blame in this sample.

Combining all of the above information, poorer cognitive functioning in the child, greater father involvement in childrearing, particularly, greater availability to the child, positive paternal views about their role in childcare in spite of child management difficulties, and disagreements between parents about father-child interactions, the following implications for mental health workers emerge. Above all, it appears that some intervention is needed

to help fathers learn better child management strategies. As has been suggested (Steinberg et al., 1981) such lack of knowledge may be one of the precursors of child abuse. There is also a need to provide information to the father about how he can foster and stimulate the child's intellectual functioning while they are at home together. There were indications from other responses of jobless fathers that they spend no more time in cognitively enriching activities such as reading to the child with their children than their employed peers in spite of being more available to the child. The importance of including training in both child management and in strategies for stimulating cognitive growth was made particularly salient by the significant correlations found between scores the jobless men obtained on several items on the questionnaire. For example, the frequency the men reported punishing the child was positively related to the frequency they reported they helped the child to learn. And the time they said they spent reading to the child was negatively related to the frequency they reported setting limits for the child. Neither of these correlations, nor several other similar ones, were significant for the group of working class employed men. If it is true that jobless fathers who read to their children a good deal tend not to set limits for them, and the men who frequently help their children to learn also frequently punish them, then unemployed fathers appear to be engaging in childrearing practices likely to lead to future problems for the child.

The data also suggest that any instruction for fathers be coordinated with a comparable intervention for mothers lest the discrepancy between mothers' and fathers' views become even greater. The program for mothers

should also include content on how the women can facilitate healthy father-child relations and not sabotage them, which is a real possibility. In addition, mental health workers should meet with mothers and fathers together, either in a group or a family session, so that their perceptions of what is going on between the father and child can be reconciled.

It is also suggested here that the children's teachers be encouraged to plan and suggest some specific activities, preferably with a male orientation, that fathers and children can do together at home. The experience would be particularly valuable if the activity could be geared to the specific cognitive strengths and weaknesses of each individual child. School social workers, school psychologists, and mental health consultants could possibly assist teachers in developing a collection of such material and ideas to be shared with their colleagues. The wheel should not have to be reinvented over and over again.

Finally, as a primary prevention effort, mental health workers involved with school personnel should confer with those in charge of curriculum decisions to explore the possibility of including two types of content relevant to unemployment. One is child management techniques, which should be part of the high school curriculum of all students. Structural unemployment is likely to affect both sexes in the years to come, but particularly males who will undoubtedly find themselves at home with their children during those periods. The second content that has a place in the curriculum is a discussion of unemployment as an integral part of career education. This topic is virtually ignored when educating students about careers. If children who are exposed to career information starting in kindergarten, as is true in

the State of Michigan, were to hear that there are periods of time when people may not be able to work through no fault of their own, the stigma of unemployment might be reduced, and young people might begin to plan for life activities that are not work focused.

It should be emphasized that these suggestions are based on some initial findings of a small study with a low response rate. Thus they must be considered as very tentative. However, it can be said that the families interviewed do exist; the question that remains to be answered is how representative they are of families experiencing paternal unemployment in communities across the country. If the findings of this study do hold up, it appears that mental health workers will have an important role to play in efforts to prevent paternal unemployment from leading to child abuse and in using opportunities provided by paternal joblessness to foster the growth of young children.

Footnotes

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